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The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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MASTERING THE VOCABULARY

PHYSICAL directors know that it is not necessarily the man of greatest muscular development who excels in the gymnasium, but the athlete whose muscles have been trained to respond freely to his bidding. Similarly, the writer of good vocabulary is not one who knows a great many words, but one who has acquired facility and effectiveness in the use of whatever words he does know.

Systematic study of the dictionary will have no effect upon the writer's powers of expression. Many people, indeed, know more words than they are able to use naturally, while editors frequently come upon the work even of illiterate persons who show remarkable powers of graphic statement.

In straining after what is mistakenly conceived to be a wide vocabulary, many writers merely involve themselves in awkwardness. "Never use the word 'said' in dialogue," cautions one adviser. "It is just as easy to say, 'he barked,' or 'he sniggered,' or 'he caroled.'"

The result of following this advice is a strained and painful type of narration. Why should we not repeat "said," if it is the natural word to use? The writer who knows how to employ his vocabulary can, and usually does, use "said" an unlimited number of times in any given passage of dialogue; and other serviceable words are similarly repeated whenever needed. Repetition is not sought, of course. The sole aim of the discerning writer is to employ the natural word in its place. In an earlier article, under the caption of " 'He Said' and 'She Said,' " I gave this subject a more detailed treatment. My purpose in recurring to it is to emphasize the fact that effective diction is less dependent upon the number of words available for use than upon the good use made of those at hand.

A good vocabulary implies ability to command words that will convey a thought simply, clearly, and easily.

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As an illustration of the distinction here insisted upon, suppose that I should phrase the italicized definition thus: "The state of being possessed of a wide scope of language, and facility in its use, implies an ability on the part of the person having it to requisition immediately such words as may be necessary to convey an intended thought without redundancy, obscurity, or undue effort."

In this second definition I have used many more words than in the first, yet only a superficial reader would regard it as indicative of a better vocabulary. Should I allow it to stand, it would evidence only inability "to convey an intended thought without redundancy, obscurity, or undue effort." In other words, though I might have many word-tools in my mental tool box, I should be a clumsy workman.

Many an abstruse scientific book, regarded with awe because so difficult to understand, is but evidence of the author's paucity of vocabulary. With a good command of language, he could have presented the subject less clumsily, and in fewer words.

I could double the length of this article and make it twice as difficult to understand by avoiding repetition of the word "vocabulary." But I shall make no attempt to find substitutes, for when I have occasion to refer to vocabulary, no combination of words will convey so easily and naturally the same concept.

The thesaurus, the dictionary, and books of synonyms and antonyms are of little avail to the writer who would acquire an effective vocabulary. In fact, such books represent a grave danger. It is easy to cultivate a lazy habit by continually looking up words instead of calling them to mind.

To illustrate: Suppose that in describing some object the writer desires to express concisely a certain form of finish. The right word does not at once come to mind. He refers to the thesaurus or the dictionary, and after some search comes upon the word "glossy." At once he recognizes that as the precise word needed.

Now the fact that this writer was obliged to look up the word shows that his *command* of language was very weak. By looking it up, he still further weakened himself. He did not add the word to his vocabulary. Had it not been already a part of his vocabulary, he would not have recognized it as the word suitable to his need. Therefore, there was no gain to offset the harm done.

The efficient writer, like the efficient general, will maintain every unit of his forces in a state of readiness for action. The writer who must remind himself of a needed word by looking for it in the thesaurus is like a general who must call upon outside help to round up his soldiers when he desires to charge a hill.

Prove to the refractory words that you are their master. To

say, "I know what I want to express, but I can't quite put my finger on the word," has a bad moral effect upon your mental organization. Suppose a general were to say: "I have just the captain to lead a charge against that fort, but I don't know where to find him."

Efficient organization, mental or physical, depends largely upon drill. Be exacting with yourself, and refuse to be satisfied with a sentence unless it expresses, without vagueness or incompleteness, the thought you have in mind. If you once permit yourself to rest content with a makeshift, your sense of values will be dulled, and thereafter you will less readily detect imperfection.

Of course, the dictionary, the thesaurus, and all good reference books would be incapable of abuse if they did not also have their use. So far as enlarging a vocabulary is concerned, the dictionary is helpful, for instance, in supplying the meaning that attaches to a new word that may have been met with in reading. But that does not make the word a part of the student's working vocabulary any more than the purchase of a piano makes the owner a musician. On the other hand, if one is already an accomplished musician, the purchase of a piano gives a new instrument for expression.

The first essential, then, is for a writer to become proficient in the handling of words. A considerable degree of proficiency may be gained with perhaps only a few hundred words; but once acquired, it may be extended to cover many thousands. The selection of the right word for the right place becomes a matter of instinct.

One of the logical and effective ways for developing this instinct, or feeling, in the use of words is to read a wide range of authors. Read slowly and understandingly, not merely for the story, but for the language. And, of course, read authors who are notably skilful in the expression of ideas.

In this way much richness of vocabulary may be acquired, the variety of idiom rounding out an understanding of the possibilities of language.

Reading alone will not greatly improve one's powers of expression, any more than eating the best foods will make one a good cook, or than hearing high-class music will make one a singer or a pianist. But it should improve what may be termed our taste, or our "ear" for style. If I am insensible to the beauty of Milton's poetry, or to the perfection of his prose style, it is certain that I shall never of myself be able to create beauty or to clothe thought with power and elegance of diction.

Practice, then, is obviously essential to one who aspires toward expression. Comparison of our own efforts with the results achieved by masters will tell us where our phrases are awkward or

weak. By experimenting with different arrangements of words, and insistently calling upon our own resources, we shall gradually but certainly progress.

"But is there no more definite course of training that you can advise?" the ambitious student frequently demands; "some exercise that will supplement and intensify the results of reading and writing?"

In answering this question, let us bear in mind a principle which at present seems to be only faintly recognized by educators—for if they fully recognized it there would be less conning of rules and formulas in our schools and universities; textbooks would be relegated to their proper places as books of reference, and the efforts of instructors would be concentrated upon devising exercises which would cause students to consult these reference books, thus making each item of knowledge obtained a definite part of the student's mental equipment. The truth of this principle lies in the fact that information is really assimilated only when it answers to a definitely felt need. That which is merely memorized quickly escapes us. Let us have the textbooks at hand for ready reference—the more of them the better. But use these sources of information only to settle mooted points, to ascertain the why of some perplexing usage met with in reading, to correct doubtful spelling, punctuation, style, or statement of facts. The idea that we may absorb knowledge merely by reading over books of rules and formulas is as preposterous as the savage notion that the warrior could add to himself the strength of a fallen warrior by eating his heart.

Returning to the question of the ambitious student, I have found at least one exercise that intensifies the progress obtainable from reading the best authors and doing much writing. It is a synthesis of such reading and writing, and I can recommend it as having brought excellent results in cases where it has been consistently practiced by students.

An Exercise in Technique.

TAKE a piece of work by some good writer—let us say, a leading short-story in one of the popular magazines. Now forget that Jack London or Irvin S. Cobb wrote this story, and assume for the time being that *you* wrote it. "Let's pretend" that the editor to whom you had the temerity to send it has just returned the manuscript with the comment: "You have a pretty good basis for a story here, but it is too long—it should be cut down one-half."

Still assuming that the story is your own work, set about satis-

fying the editor's requirement. Read over the story two or three times in order to get thoroughly into the spirit of it, then begin cutting right down to the bone of the narrative. Realizing that, being an unknown author, you can not take liberties with your audience, you will discard ruthlessly the philosophical introduction, the bits of side comment, and much of the atmosphere and extended characterization. You will contrive to make a little atmosphere—just a touch here and there—go a long way. Instead of describing your characters in detail, you will bring out tersely a few of their salient features. The conversation must be snappy and brief—for you realize that there is grave danger of tiring your reader by an extended and possibly inferior bit of dialogue. An incident that occupies several paragraphs may be passed over in a brief sentence. Throughout, words, phrases, and clauses will be eliminated, the meaning still being retained.

Remember, you are not to rewrite the story in your own words. You are supposing the original to be the product of your own brain. Your effort is merely to discriminate between what is necessary and what is unnecessary in the former version. Suppose that you have selected "The Hussy," by Jack London, from the December, 1916, *Cosmopolitan*. It begins with this passage:

There are some stories that have to be true—the sort that cannot be fabricated by a ready fiction-reckoner. And, by the same token, there are some men with stories to tell who cannot be doubted. Such a man was Julian Jones, although I doubt the average reader of this will believe the story Julian Jones told me. Nevertheless, I believe it. So thoroughly am I convinced of its verity that I am willing—nay, eager—to invest capital in the enterprise and embark personally on the adventure to a far land.

It was in the Australian Building at the Panama-Pacific Exposition that I met him. I was standing before an exhibit of facsimiles of the record-nuggets which had been discovered in the gold fields of the antipodes. Knobbed, misshapen, and massive, it was as difficult to believe that they were not real gold as it was to believe the accompanying statistics of their weights and values.

"That's what those kangaroo-hunters call a 'nugget'!" boomed over my shoulder, directly at the largest of the specimens. I turned and looked up into the dim blue eyes of Julian Jones. I looked up, for he stood something like six feet four inches in height. His hair, a wispy, sandy yellow, seemed as dimmed and faded as his eyes. It may have been the sun which had washed out his coloring; at least, his face bore the evidence of a prodigious and ancient sunburn which had long since faded to yellow. As his eyes turned from the exhibit and focused on mine, I noted a queer look in them as of one who vainly tries to recall some fact of supreme importance.

"What's the matter with it as a nugget?" I demanded.

The remote, indwelling expression went out of his eyes as he boomed,

"Why, its size!"

"It does seem large," I admitted. "But there's no doubt it's authentic. The Australian government would scarcely dare—"

"Large!" he interrupted, with a sniff and a sneer.

"Largest ever discovered—" I started on.

"Ever discovered!" His dim eyes smoldered hotly as he proceeded. "Do you think that every lump of gold ever discovered has got into the newspapers and encyclopedias?"

Now this might get across over the signature of Jack London, but as a rule the editor demands of an untried author much greater directness. Trimming the introduction down to bare essentials,

while still endeavoring to retain the literary flavor as far as possible, we arrive at the following result:

It was in the Australian Building at the Panama-Pacific Exposition that I met Julian Jones. I was standing before an exhibit of facsimiles of the record-nuggets discovered in the antipodes.

"That's what those kangaroo-hunters call a 'nugget'!" boomed over my shoulder. I turned and looked up into the dim blue eyes of a man with wavy, sandy hair, who stood something over six feet four inches in height. His face bore evidence of a prodigious sunburn which had long since faded to yellow.

"What's the matter with it as a nugget?" I demanded. "There's no doubt it's authentic, according to the Australian government, the largest ever discovered—"

"Ever discovered!" His dim eyes smoldered. "Do you think that every lump of gold ever discovered has got into the newspapers?"

This version is not advanced as an improvement over the original. It is merely an illustration of the exercise suggested.

The chief result to be gained from this trimming down of the work of experienced writers is a definite improvement of one's working vocabulary. The student may come upon no new words in the story selected, but he will grasp something of the author's method of using words as tools, and by selecting and discarding according to his best judgment, he will gain additional facility in the handling of such tools. This exercise is nearer than any other that I know of to the art student's practice of acquiring technique by copying famous paintings. It is better than trying to tell another's story in one's own words, for it keeps the model constantly in view. The resulting narrative will be a copy in miniature of the master's conception. Followed persistently, the practice brings vital results. Of course, it should supplement, not supplant, the student's original work. And again, a wide variety of models should be selected, so that there shall be no danger of slavish imitation of one master, but a synthesis of all.

Not only does this exercise tend to give confidence in the use of words, and discrimination in their choice; but it supplies thorough training in all branches of technique. By the time the student has conscientiously reduced a worth-while story to simplified form, he has managed to enter pretty closely into the author's viewpoint. He realizes, as he never would have realized from a cursory reading, or an abstract analysis, *why* the author constructed the story as he did, *why* he employed certain incidents, *why* he emphasized this and that detail. The mechanics of the story have been absorbed by the student in the process of testing each word, phrase, and incident with a view to its right to stand in the final, simplified version.

The exercise requires labor. I have found comparatively few students who are willing to build themselves by this method. They tire after two or three experiments. Strangely enough, the young writer's own faults of grammar, punctuation, and spelling tend to creep into the final draft of a remodeled story. This is something that I can not understand. It must betoken very defective powers

of observation, when a student, copying such a phrase as "*I believe the dog has slipped its muzzle*," reported Fred, transforms it to "*I believe, the dog has slipped it's muzzle*". Reported Fred.

Beginners, especially those who lack facility of style or whose fault is verbosity, above all others need this training in technique. But it is good drill for any writer. To obtain best results, examples for simplification should be selected from among writers whom the student definitely feels to be superior to him. The tyro may benefit from working with stories published in minor magazines; the writer who is beginning to make the minor markets should select for the exercise the best work in leading magazines; while writers high in the scale may choose from those who exemplify awe-inspiring subtleties of technique—classic models that would perhaps only confuse the beginner.

—W. E. H.

POETRY AND RIMERY

BY JOHN H. CLIFFORD

Versifying for Practice

IN Dr. Rossiter Johnson's delightful book of help, so happily entitled *The Alphabet of Rhetoric*, we find encouragement for those who would practice versemaking: "If a boy takes daily exercise in a gymnasium, it does not follow that he intends to become a professional acrobat. Neither is it correct to assume that if one does not aspire to be a professional poet, or even an amateur, he must never write verses. If one expects to write prose in the course of his life, and if he wishes to make it elegant and effective, he should certainly give himself practice in the art of versification. And the less he knows about poetry, the more he should write it. What is distinctively called poetry is by no means the only rhythmical matter in literature. Good prose has a rhythm of its own, without which it loses a large part of the power to fasten itself in the memory of the reader."

Herein we discover also justification—if any be needed—for our endeavor in *The Student-Writer* to help those who send us rimes to examine—to improve if we can. And for any who feel that they never can learn to do good work in versifying, Doctor Johnson provides further comfort—although in a negative form—when he says: "Poems that are perfect in all respects, like other perfect things, are exceedingly rare." If even the masters seldom reach perfection, beginners should not be disheartened to find that the heaven of success is not to be reached at a single bound.

More Remarks on the Sonnet

PROMPTED by remarks in the February issue, a friend who says that she "was obsessed with a desire to write a sonnet" has sent us the lines that follow, requesting us to tell her whether they are a sonnet. When the censor of fledgling sermonizers at the Harvard Divinity School said to young Theodore Parker after a chapel effort, "Your sermon is not a sermon," the good divine did not foresee that his pupil was to become the prince of preachers in America. Taking no chances, we shall

not tell this writer that her sonnet is not a sonnet. But we have a better reason for refraining—her sonnet, we think, **is** a sonnet, although it has some obvious defects. In thought development we do not see that it requires any bettering.

A snowy robe has mantled all the ground;
In folds dark clouds hang o'er the distant hill.
Now cold and fierce the wind with freezing chill
Comes shuddering 'cross the river, icy-bound.
A furious blast roars up the steep bluff-side,
And through the aged pines so tall and strong
It sweeps. The trembling trees augment their song
Of praise to Boreas while he reigns in pride.

Not long the frenzied storm-king shows his strength,
For bursts the sun all-glorious on the scene.
His diamond broidery spreads the snow serene,
And drifting mists trail far their heavy length;
While fleecy cloudlets sun-touched, float on high,
And Nature laughs beneath an azure sky.—O. V. R.

"Cold" and "freezing," in the third line, are words not well chosen to accompany "chill." In line four, "shuddering" looks a little shaky, but perhaps may stand. "Icy-bound" sounds well, but if ice-bound is meant, we must respect the grammar. In line seven, "trembling" is too weak to describe the trees previously so storm-shaken. Line eleven has the right figure, but is marred by the ungrammatical "spreads" (too huge a task for the broidery) and the here meaningless "serene." In the last line we seek refuge from the overworked "azure sky."

While in sonnet structure (except the Shakespearean) we find many variations in the disposition of rimes, the form most widely adhered to is that of the octave and sestet, after the Petrarchian, or regular, model. The first eight lines—octave, or octet—have a fixed riming relation, but in the last six lines—sestet—poets use much freedom of arrangement. In order to see how well the sonnet under consideration adapts itself to the stricter form just mentioned, we submit a version in which the closest possible adherence to the thought and movement of the very suggestive original is attempted. The hanging indention, reference to which was made in connection with Oliver Herford's sonnet reprinted in *The Student-Writer* for February, serves to distinguish the two quatrains composing the octave, likewise the two tercets forming the sestet.

A snowy robe has mantled all the ground,
In folds dark clouds hang o'er the distant hill;
Now sweeps the wind with keen, untempered chill
Across the land in winter's ice-chain bound.

The furious gusts roar in the woods around,
And through the aged pines, so tall and strong,
They shriek; the reeling giants raise their song
To vie with Boreas where his blasts resound.

Ere long the frenzied Storm King spends his strength;
Soon bursts the sun upon the world below,
With myriad brilliants decking fields of snow.

While drifting mists withdraw their trailing length,
And fleecy cloudlets radiant float on high,
All Nature smiles beneath a friendly sky.

In the regular sonnet the practice of ending with a couplet is less usual than that of disposing of the rhymes of the sestet more in accord with the arrangement of the octave. In our version, from regard to the author's style, we allow the couplet to stand. Often this ending adds force or beauty, or both, to the composition. Repeated use of it may sometimes produce an effect like that of anticlimax. All the Shakespearean sonnets are composed of three quatrains clinched with a couplet. Theodore Watts-Dunton says: "A chief part of the pleasure of the Shakespearean sonnet is in the expectance of the climacteric rest of the couplet at the end." But a recent rereading of these sonnets made us feel that the average reader—if not also, sometimes, the eager student, the patient scholar—might experience the effect of monotony at one or more of these rime-rests, even if they be climacteric. To climb a ladder (climax) with 154 rounds, one must needs be athletic. And though Watts-Dunton and other critics value so highly the Shakespearean, or English, sonnet, the best modern sonneteers in the main prefer the Italian form.

To speak again of monotony, note in the 154 sonnets attributed to Shakespeare 21 rimes based on the letter *e*. In order, they run:

be, thee; be, thee; thee, be; me, thee; see, thee; thee, me; thee, me; be, me; thee, me; thee, me; thee, me; see, thee; ye, me; fee, me; thee, me; be, thee; be, thee; thee, me; me, free; me, be; me, thee.

To end, as we began, with words of Dr. Rossiter Johnson, we quote again from *The Alphabet of Rhetoric*:

"There are a few good sonnets in our literature, and thousands of unsuccessful ones. A single sonnet, well turned, is an agreeable thing to find, but a shoal of them is liable to be tiresome or repulsive. Mrs. Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese are a rare example of the contrary; but these may be read consecutively—in fact, should be so read—as the several stanzas of one poem."

Arthur S. Hoffman, editor of *Adventure Magazine*, writes:

My dear Mr. Hawkins: Let me thank you for *The Student-Writer*. It has good stuff in it. I don't know whether Chauncey Thomas will remember me, but I know him and count myself one of his friends. I wish you'd tell him for me that in his "Breaking Into the Magazines" I think he's given us poor editors considerably worse reputation than we deserve. In any case, however, please give him my best regards.

K. P. W. writes: *The Student-Writer* has always proven a friend in need—my need—but with the enlarged staff it fills many needs. It is the first literary journal, I believe, to have distinct departments devoted to journalism and poetry, an arrangement that certainly broadens the scope of its appeal.

Mrs. Scott's "Lesson of the Hitching Post" was an especially illuminating and helpful lesson in learning to "see things," excellent advice to the beginner—and others, for that matter, when there seems to be nothing to write about. Mr. Clifford's method of analysis ought to help poets to find themselves. But why specify further? I liked it all.

Are you in touch with your fellow writers—their activities, achievements, methods?

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THE STORY WITH A PURPOSE

BY CHAUNCEY THOMAS

Extract from a letter of criticism to a writer who feels that she has a mission to perform with her pen:

NOW then—square between the eyes: You do not want to write. That is your sole fault. Judging from your letter and yarn combined, you apparently want to reform the world, and want to use writing merely as a tool to that end. If you could swing a better tool you would use it, and not write at all. Hence, heretofore you have always written with your left hand, so to speak. Your main object has been something totally different from writing. And that is the reason why you have not written. You have never tried to write.

All you have to do to write is just to write. No one can write till they can write against their own personal internal convictions. Pick out a subject of which you thoroughly disapprove—just for practice, I mean—and write in its favor. "The value of a saloon to the home," as an example. There is always something to be said on both sides of everything—just try it. And you will probably see in that one piece of work more than I can tell you with a ton of postage stamps.

You speak of itching to write a sociological novel—whatever that may be. No one has ever written one yet—at least a good one—and never will. Just write for the story's own sake, and let the story go where it pleases—then you may write something. The "moral" spoils every story, long or short, if it howls at you. If your facts in themselves reveal this or that, well and good. But if there is the least suspicion that the writer himself is seeking, via the story, to preach, then that ends it.

The reader pays his valuable dime for a story. Your unconscious plan is to get him to buy ten cents' worth of preaching about the tariff, prohibition, suffrage, Mormonism, or whatever brand of private code you are peddling—and the story itself, the thing he wants to buy, is just the wrapper.

So I think about your work. You hold forth the promise of a "story," but it is only a wrapper for some wonderful world-saving Truth, discovered by you and Moses, and that was family talk among Pharaoh's ancestors. Sample: London killed himself with Socialism. O. Henry told his story—and from it one could select the moral he wished. The result is that London—in his later work I mean—had a very limited but loyal audience—like any other preacher—while O. Henry had a thousand times more than when he began writing.

It is universally agreed, is it not, that all of London that will live is his early work. At first he wrote just for writing's sake. Later he used his skill as a wrapper for preaching, and you can see the result for yourself.

Don't write unless you simply have to. That is all there is to it—if you would write at all. Argument, no matter how concealed, is not literature. And by literature, I mean here anything that one might wish to read twice.

A man who preaches because he does not like to shovel is never a successful preacher. The man who would rather shovel but who preaches because he must preach for preaching's own sake has the only chance to succeed. Though nothing insures success, remember, in any line. All one can do is to get the odds on his side—the outcome rests with Fate.

So with writing. I can give you no sure receipt—all I can do is to tell you what not to do. And you must not pretend, either to the public or to yourself, to write when you really are trying to preach.

So much for the very core of your lack of success thus far. Forget all your sociological plans—and put writing for its own sake first, or quit it quick. "The play's the thing," as Bill remarks, and he knew. "The yarn's the thing"—that is the one big lesson for the writer with a mission to learn. Let the moral take care of itself and pray to Allah—if you think of it at all—that your yarn hasn't any moral concealed on its person.—C. T.

P. S.—Just as an antidote, write an essay on "Let the Poor Rot." (We're both poor, but what has that to do with the essay?)—C. T.

BRIEF TALKS ON JOURNALISM

BY EFFIE LEESE SCOTT

The Dwindling News Story

"SINCE our last talk," said the Cub to the Special Writer, "I've been putting your suggestions into practice and I think I'm learning to see things. Now, that fire of last Monday night was really interesting. I've just written a column about it for The Weekly Trumpet, our local paper, and I believe I might as well make some extra copies for The County Sentinel and The State Tribune. While I am about it, what's the matter with sending a copy to the New York editors?"

"H'm. What is there about the story that makes you think that it has more than local interest?"

"It has in it a number of those salient, out-of-the-ordinary elements that you told me determine news values. The fire loss is small, but the story is good stuff all right. I'll read it to you:

"The citizens of this little burg were aroused from their slumbers last Monday about midnight by the ringing of the fire bell. Tumbling half asleep from their beds, a goodly number of them hurriedly dressed and went to the fire, which was discovered to be in the one-room shack occupied by Jimmy Benson, the junk dealer. The bucket brigade soon arrived on the scene, but the fire was beyond control, and the shack, together with the adjoining shed and its contents, burned to the ground.

Benson has the sympathy of the entire community in the loss he has sustained. He not only lost his home, but his faithful horse Dopp was burned too.

Benson and his blind sorrel horse have been familiar figures on our streets for a number of years. Before coming to Corn Hollow, Benson was coachman for President Cleveland and drove old Dopp to the White House carriage. When the administration changed, Jim lost his place and came West. Just before he left, however, the President made Jim a present of the horse. At that time old Dopp had seen his best days, and soon after reaching here he went blind.

All that Jim was able to save from the fire was the plaid suit that he wore. Some of his—"

"Stop a minute! All that's interesting enough to local readers; but before you send out any carbon copies, let's talk it over a bit."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Your story will do for The Weekly Trumpet; but you have forgotten what I told you about the danger of burdening a story with unnecessary detail if you want it to travel very far. If you wanted to run a long distance you wouldn't put on your heaviest shoes and overcoat, would you? Instead, you would probably get rid of everything that was likely to hold you back. Even the editor of The County Sentinel wouldn't take your story as it stands."

"Then the time I spent getting those details together was all——"

"Oh, the time wasn't lost. You can use a great deal of the same

material for The County Sentinel; but in rearranging the article leave off that extended introduction, plunge right into your story and tell it through to the end, omitting such minor details as the color of the horse, the pattern of Benson's clothes, that sentimental part about the sympathy of the people for Jim, and everything else that has only local interest."

"Will it be all right then to make a copy of the Sentinel story to send to The State Tribune?"

"Hardly. Readers at the state capital are nearly a hundred miles away. For The Tribune you will need only a summary of the event, but don't omit any of the vital, unusual elements that really make the story worth telling. The article should not run over two hundred words."

"Condense a whole-column story to two hundred words?"

"Yes. Listen to this and tell me if anything important has been omitted:

"In a fire of unknown origin at Corn Hollow last Monday night, a horse formerly owned by President Cleveland was burned to death. For a number of years the horse, known as Dopp, has been in the possession of Jim Benson, a junk dealer, who for a time was coachman for the Cleveland family. When the administration changed, Benson lost his place and came West. Just before Jim left Washington, the President made him a present of the horse. At that time it had seen its best days and soon after arriving in Corn Hollow it went blind. The fire destroyed all of Benson's property, consisting of a one-room shack and an adjoining shed which served as a stable for old Dopp."

"Whew! Everything's there, all right, but I don't see how you are going to do any more cutting for the New York papers."

"Perhaps we won't exactly cut, but we will make some changes. A safe rule to follow, when sending a news item very far, is to emphasize the biggest feature and let everything else revolve around that. Most correspondents send in too much copy, and editors are encompassed by wastebaskets overflowing with stories that can't be used because they haven't been trimmed down to the essential details. Now, in this story the biggest draw you have is the name 'Cleveland.' Big names have a charm. The item, in all probability, would appeal to a New York editor if arranged like this:

"The last of the carriage horses used at the White House while Grover Cleveland was president was burned to death Monday night in a fire at Corn Hollow, Nevada. Those who were in Washington during the Cleveland administration will recall the big horse, known as Dopp, which was seen walking up the White House driveway every pleasant afternoon at exactly four o'clock. When the family left Washington, concern for the future of the horse led the President to give it to his coachman, Jim Benson, who was just starting for the West, and who had the horse in his possession at the time it was burned."

"I get the idea, and I'll try to fix my story exactly like——"

"But the item has already been played up in the New York papers. I sent it in the morning after the fire."

"The morning after? Why, what was the rush?"

"Timeliness, my boy! Timeliness! That's the great underlying principle of all news values. Whenever you have a story that contains a news element, get rid of it as soon as Uncle Sam will carry it from you. As I often say, editors are always on the alert for the unusual, but they want even unusual things while those things are still alive."

"Gosh!" said the Cub.

BOOKS RECEIVED.

"Good English in Good Form," by Dora Knowlton Ranous, with introduction by Rossiter Johnson, Ph. D., LL. D. (Sturgis & Walton Co.) A carefully prepared hand-book by an experienced editor and author, especially designed for authors. Practical chapters on titles, paragraphs, punctuation, preparation of manuscripts, proof-reading, derivation of words, niceties of correspondence, conventional forms, letter-writing, etc. 248 pages. Order through The Student-Writer. Postpaid \$1.10.

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HACKNEYED SIMILES AND REPETITION

This informal letter came in while the article on "Mastering the Vocabulary" was being prepared for publication. It is of special interest, since it supplements the advice there given concerning the avoidance of repetition by straining after variety.

IT seems to me that I've seen in your magazine, "We welcome suggestions from readers." I'm a reader, so here goes!

One of the things that give me the most pleasure in reading is freshness of expression. It is one of the things that send you back to the same author for more.

The other day, it seemed to me that I came across the reason for a lot of the bromidic expression even of original thoughts. There is a little youngster that I know quite well here, who is about four years old. The last few months he has been learning English from a new standpoint—phrases. He learned words when he was a tiny baby, but now evidently he has discovered that grown-ups speak not only in combinations of the simple words but more often in combinations of "word mosaics"—"multiple-form words." So, once started on a word or two that belong in a hackneyed phrase, he cannot resist adding the others, whether the phrase fits or not.

I said something like that to a friend who was "rewrite editor" on Top Notch for two years. She told me that a good deal of her job was simply rewriting hackneyed phrases and similes, and she added that her rule for changing similes was so simple that a baby could follow it—to keep the likeness in the same kind of things, but to select one that hasn't been used before. Example: For "scarcer than hen's teeth" she would substitute "scarcer than hen's dentists."

Then she said that from the editor's point of view she wished that "young authors wouldn't try so desperately to avoid repetition"—that many times she went over a story and replaced the clumsy, roundabout expressions with the word that was probably the author's instinctive choice, but had been avoided because he was afraid of repetition. Also, that in avoiding repetition they weakened, rather than strengthened, the fabric. For instance, this sentence, "He went to war, not because of patriotism, nor because of duty, but because of indifference to his fate," is more forceful than "He went to war not because of patriotism, nor on the other hand of duty, but as the result of indifference to his fate."

She told me that for Top Notch they'd buy most anything if it had a P-I-O-T. I asked her if it was really, then, of advantage to an author to do his own polishing, if his story was salable anyway, and the magazine employed her to attend to that feature. She replied, "Yes. He gets more money for it, for the very simple reason that it doesn't take my time, supposed to be that of a specialist and expensive."

So here you have the views of two people with different wants. I, the reader, want ideas in a fresh dress, and the editor wants less work to do. Together, we represent those who use your subscribers' goods.

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Dear Mrs. Scott: I am sending you another manuscript for criticism. Your "merciless" criticism of my other article has enabled me to put it into salable shape. I changed the title as you suggested.—S. B. H.

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Willard Price, editor of *The World Outlook*, New York, writes to the author:

Richard Harding Davis's first rule in war correspondence was, “Use similes that the man at home can understand.” You evidently have the same idea. You take the popularly unknown abstract principles of fiction and by comparing them with known things such as lenses, eggshells, precipices, and snow-banks, you make the essentials of technique ridiculously easy to understand. Congratulations on your gift of clarity.

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